

Mallarme, Manet, and the Belle Epoch in Paris

by Julie Lorenzen

Site Links

 [Home](#)
 [Book Reviews](#)
 [Articles](#)
 [Privacy Policy](#)
 [Resources](#)

By the nineteenth century, Paris was the world center for art, literature, and music. In the latter part of the century, art and poetry began to deviate from traditions sanctioned by the official Salon and art and poetry critics. Some of the transformation began in 1862 when the Parisian-born painter Edouard Manet combined a “current social subject and an unconventional tonal style in “La Musique aux Tuileries” which [...] was influential to a new artistic outlook.” (Gowing, 630) A year later Manet grabbed public attention when he exhibited *Le Dejeuner sur l’herbe* in the Salon de Refuses in 1863. Many Parisians and art critics found the painting vulgar because it portrayed classic nude women having a picnic with fully clothed men. His choice of subject matter, which reflected contemporary society, would continue to confound critics and the public alike throughout his career. In poetry, a committee of three poets rejected an early version of Stephane Mallarme’s most popular poem, “L’Apres-midi d’un faune” for the third volume of the poetry anthology, “Le Parnasse contemporain”, published in the mid 1860s.

Le Dejeuner sur l’herbe and *L’Apres-midi d’un faune* represented a change in art and poetry and both can be considered deviants from tradition. However, while both of these works were created in the 1860s, the greatest transformation of art and poetry from traditional to modern occurred during the Belle Epoch (1871-1914). A modern world emerged during the Belle Epoch. Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, the bicycle appeared in Paris, the Lumiere brothers made the first short film, Gustave Eiffel built the Eiffel Tower, and Charles Darwin and Louis Pasteur made major contributions to science and medicine. According to Rosemary Lloyd, in her book *Mallarme: the Poet and His Circle of Friends*, “this was a time in which writers and artists were intensely involved in exploring contemporary society. (77) The best-known group involved in

[Top Paris Sites](#)

View Beautiful Image Slide Shows Of Top Bing Travel Destinations!
www.bing.com/Travel

[2010 Paris Book Festival](#)

Final Deadline Approaching Honoring World Literature
www.parisbookfestival.cc

[From Paris Flight](#)

Bye-bye Booking Fee, Hello Savings Flying Just got Cheaper at Expedia
www.Expedia.com

[Visit Paris](#)

Go To AARP Travel To Plan Your Trip To Paris & Get Travel Tips
Destinations.AARP.org

exploring modern society was the Impressionists— Pierre Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Edgar Degas and a few others. They were known for their use of vivid colors, unique brush styles and tendency (except for Degas) to paint outside. I believe that the friendships existing between artists and poets can be credited with contributing a great deal to the modern art and literature that came from Paris during the Belle Epoch. The Impressionists just mentioned were all good friends and their circle included Stephane Mallarme and Edouard Manet. Although Manet did not exhibit with the Impressionists when they held their Salon de independents from 1874 to 1886 and did not embrace the title of “Impressionist”, he was considered their leader. The slightly older Manet developed modern thinking about art with his unique brush style and choices of contemporary subjects and settings. Stephane Mallarme rejected the metrical rhythms and themes that marked the Parnassian style popular in the day, in order to achieve a free, more prose-like verse. As for theme, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica, Mallarme sought to describe “the fleeting immediate sensations of man’s inner life and experience.” (458) In my opinion, part of the reason why approaches to poetry and painting progressed was due to the close friendships that evolved in Paris. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the importance of the friendship between Mallarme and Manet and explain how it contributed toward their creative endeavors.

In her book, Rosemary Lloyd included a quote by Mallarme’s biographer, Henri Mondor that emphasized how their friendship contributed to both the art and poetry worlds and Paris. “Their dialogue, spread out over 8-10 years, benefiting from their already almost daily meeting and consisting on the one side, of ingenious remarks full of imagery, and on the other, of energetic, sarcastic replies, must be considered one of the moments in which French art, [...] ripened in the intimate familiarity of two creative spirits.” (VM, 411)

In the early 1870s Manet and Mallarme both lived on rue de Moscou and saw each other nearly every day from about 1872 until Manet died May 7, 1883. Rosemary Lloyd wrote “in the October of that year his widow, Suzanne, remarked in a letter to Mallarme’: “You really were his best friend, and he loved you

dearly.” (128)

The friendship was particularly important in establishing Mallarme as a major poet in Paris. In the 1860s, he was a schoolteacher in Tournan, France, 350 miles south of Paris, who dreamt of escaping the provincial town he worked in to live and work in Paris. “I need people, Parisian girlfriends, paintings, music. I’m hungry for poets,” Mallarme wrote to a friend. (Higonnett, 312). Mallarme realized his dream when he received a teaching appointment at a Parisian lycee and arrived in Paris in 1871, after the siege of Paris during the Franco Prussian war and the disastrous events involving the Communards. Lloyd wrote “Mallarme’s move to Paris did not bring the sudden and abrupt transformation in his situation that he had imagined during his years [in Tournan], but living in Paris meant that that he was able to become more rapidly aware of changes in the artistic world than he had in the provinces. And the move also led to a series of important friendships. (77)

The charming, magnetic Mallarme who already made some contacts through his letters, soon made even more friends, which included Poets Paul Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, who were also known as founders of Symbolist poetry. The latter two, lived a Bohemian lifestyle and are known had a short-term homosexual relationship. Mallarme, however, went into debt in Tournan in order to fill his home with expensive furniture reminiscent of the bourgeoisie lifestyle, married in the 1860s and had two children and continued to live the same lifestyle in Paris.

I think the reason Mallarme was drawn to Manet and some of the other painters like Morisot was because they were part of the Bourgeoisies while Verlaine and Rimbaud lived as Bohemians. In his book, *Bohemian Paris*, Jerrold Siegel described the relationship between Verlaine and Mallarme as distant although Verlaine did write a biography on Mallarme.

Mallarme’s love of beautiful things may be another reason why he may have associated more with the painters than poets. Lloyd also notes that “it was Mallarme’s puckish sense of humor, his tact, and above all his love of beauty that allowed him to establish lasting friendships with artists, even those as irascibly dictatorial and demanding as Whistler.” (122) Mallarme

often blended art with his poetry. He demonstrated his love of beauty by writing quatrains (which were basically addresses) on the beautifully decorated stationary of the day and sending them to friends like Berthe Morisot and her daughter Julie. He also was known for giving beautiful fans with personalized poetry written on them to his female friends.

In 1875 and 1876, Mallarme and Manet collaborated on a few notable projects. In 1875, Manet created five drawings reproduced lithographically for Mallarme's translation of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven*. Manet's creations for that collaboration would become some of his best-known drawing. In 1876, Manet produced four drawing for wood engravings illustrating Mallarme's "*L'Apres-midi d'un faune*."

It is interesting to me that the same year Mallarme wrote his popular poem, which translated to English, reads "*Afternoon of a Faun*", 1876, was also the same year that Manet painted his famous *Portrait of Mallarme*. Manet's subject, in his mid-thirties at the time, looks out from the center of the painting and appears to be meditating over the book on which his hand is resting. Lloyd wrote "The Japanese screen behind him, with its mere suggestion of flowers and butterflies, the transubstantiation of text into smoke; and the poet's rapt contemplation all combine to suggest the blend of intellect and sensuality, the quiet understatement of the essential point that united the two friends." (127).

The quote reveals a lot about the two men and their era. The Japanese print represents the popularity of Japanese art amongst Parisians, which especially included artists and poets. I also liked her point that a shared intellect was an essential bond between the two friends. Manet often painted educated men reading. He portrayed art critic Emile Zola reading in 1868. The portrait of Zola was exhibited at the Salon in the same year. Manet had quite a few works exhibited at the Salon, but in the early 1870s, the juries for the Salon started to question his work.

In 1874 and 1876, Mallarme wrote two articles that supported Manet's work. The articles were written after the Salon Jury of 1874 rejected some of Manet's. Mallarme titled the first article "*The Painting Jury for 1874 and Manet*." According to the book *Manet and his*

Critics by George Heard Hamilton, “the primary object of Mallarme’s article was to accuse members of the jury of having broken faith with the public by prohibiting it from seeing the artist’s work and from making up its own mind about Manet’s achievement.” (181) The second article was published in the *English Art Month Review and Photographic Folio* on September 30, 1876. According to Hamilton, Mallarme “summarized in general terms the development of the Impressionist aesthetic and remarked on the critical acumen of Baudelaire and Zola in distinguishing so early Manet from his academic contemporaries” (186). Hamilton goes on to write that the “article itself had no influence on the criticism of Manet’s work in France.” (186)

Mallarme wouldn’t become a famous poet until the mid-1880s (after Manet) had died, and that was most likely the reason why both of his articles didn’t have much of an impact on other critics. However, the articles were representative of just another body of work that resulted from the friendship between the two men. Further, the articles conveyed Mallarme’s sympathy toward Manet in his struggle to get his works accepted by the Salon and art critics in general. The articles also revealed Mallarme’s progressive thoughts about the art of Manet and the Impressionists and his support of their new style.

In conclusion, the friendship between Mallarme and Manet was just a tiny representation of what was happening during the Belle Epoch in Paris. Innovations abounded in technology, science and medicine, which made huge impacts on society. The more progressive art and literature created by the Impressionists and Symbolists during the Belle Epoch mostly reflected society. However, the art and literature impacted society as well because of the new approaches taken by painters and poets such as Mallarme and Manet. Acceptance did not come easily to Mallarme and Manet and that is why I thought the friendship between the two was so critical —because they provided each other with the necessary support not found in the general public. Further, the progressive artists and poets who lived during the Belle Epoch lived two completely different lifestyles— Bohemian and Bourgeoisie. Manet lived the Bourgeoisie lifestyle like Stephane Mallarme, whose distant friendships with fellow symbolic poets could be

attributed to the fact that the other poets lived a more Bohemian lifestyle. Both are still considered to be the founders of their respective fields—poetry and art. While the friendship lasted more than ten years, I focused mostly on the early 1870s because that is when the greatest collaboration between the two occurred. The Portrait of Mallarme, Manet's accompanying sketches for Mallarme's translation of Poe's Raven and his poem "Afternoon of the Faun", and Mallarme's articles supporting Manet's art all fell between 1874 and 1876.

[Library Reference Search](#)

This site is (c) 2004, Julie Lorenzen. All rights reserved.